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# REALIA STRATEGIES:

## Connecting Language Acquisition to the Real World

This strategy addresses the following TESOL Standards:

**Goal 2: To use English to achieve academically in all content areas**

Standard 2: Students will use English to obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in spoken and written form.

Standard 3: Students will use appropriate learning strategies to construct and apply academic knowledge.

**R**evalia is a term for real things—concrete objects—that are used in the classroom to build background knowledge and vocabulary. Realia is used to provide experiences on which to build and to provide students with opportunities to use all the senses in learning. While using realia in the classroom is not always possible, it is usually the best choice if the student is to learn all they can about a topic. Realia allows the student to see, feel, hear, and even smell the object being explored. If the real thing is not available, the teacher must move down the continuum from the concrete (real thing), to a replica such as a model, to a semiconcrete object such as a photograph or illustration. However, each move down the continuum causes the loss of some sensory information that could be helpful in comprehension. See Figure 3.1 for suggestions of classroom realia that are helpful in the presentation of powerful learning experiences.

### STEP BY STEP

The steps in implementing the use of realia are:

- **Identifying opportunities to use realia**—Be aware of opportunities to include realia in lessons as you plan. Preread any stories to be read aloud or used for reading instruction to identify vocabulary that may be unfamiliar to the students and locate realia that will be helpful to their understanding.

- **Collecting realia**—Begin to collect items that can be stored in the classroom and organize them so that they can be easily accessed for instruction. Plastic tubs or large clear plastic bags are often used for this purpose. Some items will be used with only one theme or book and should be stored with the theme materials or book. Yard sales and end-of-season sales at craft stores are good sources of realia for classroom use. Parents can often be helpful in locating and supplying useful items.

Category	Realia	Uses
Household items	Eating utensils, kitchen appliances (from different cultures), miniatures such as household furniture, old-fashioned items no longer commonly seen	Active experiences, vocabulary development, role playing, story reenactment, prereading activities, oral language practice, story problems in math
Food	Fruit, vegetables, unusual items unfamiliar to children; many plastic food items are available for classroom use	Sensory experiences, vocabulary development, acting out stories, grammar activities (singular, plural)
Clothing	Different kinds of hats, gloves, sweaters, jackets, boots, any examples of ethnic clothing to support understanding	Vocabulary development, story reenactment, writing support, oral language practice
Literacy materials	Books, magazines, newspapers, encyclopedia, reference books, checkbooks, bank books	Role play, vocabulary development, easy access for research, exposure
Farm or occupational items	Rakes, plows, harnesses, tools, baskets, hay, nails, models of barns, silos, scarecrows, wagons, farm carts	Prereading activities, role playing, vocabulary development, knowledge of size and weight
Flowers and plants	Examples of flowers and plants being studied or read about; unusual plants such as large sunflowers, pumpkins	Vocabulary development, sensory experiences, size comparisons
Animals	Classroom pets, house pets, farm and zoo animals, birds	Sensory experiences, vocabulary development
Crafts	Knitting, crocheting, tatting, sculpting clay, potter's wheel, spinning wheel, loom	Vocabulary development, role playing, sensory experiences, prereading activities
Ethnic items	Piñatas, chopsticks, wok, tortilla press, tea sets, clothing	Vocabulary development, cross-cultural experiences

**Figure 3.1** Realia for Powerful Learning

- **Building a library of realia**—Collaborate with other teachers at your school or grade level to build a library of realia that can be shared for major theme studies. Locate local merchants, farmers, and other resources for the loan of large items such as farm equipment or animals.

- **Using field trips as realia**—If it's too large to move and your students' learning would benefit by experiencing it, take a field trip. Give your students the opportunity to really understand what they are studying.

## APPLICATIONS AND EXAMPLES

Ms. Castaño has found a beautiful little bilingual book, which she wants to use with her third graders. Many of her Hispanic students speak very good English now but the parents are concerned that they are losing their fluency in Spanish. Ms. Castaño is always looking for ways to encourage the use of their primary language. The book she has found, *My Mexico—México Mío* (Johnson, 1996) is a collection of poetry in English and Spanish. Many of her third graders will be able to read both the English and Spanish versions of the poems and there are many opportunities for active lessons and vocabulary development in both languages.

As Ms. Castaño prepares her lessons for the next week she also gathers realia to support the students' understanding. Her school is near a little park where she will be able to take the students on a walk to see an adobe wall like the one described in the poem "Adobe Brick." Maybe she can even talk her father into coming to school and demonstrating how to make adobe bricks.

Ms. Castaño has a broom in the classroom and she finds a huge plastic cockroach given to her as a joke years ago that she will use with the broom for the students to reenact the poem "I am Cucaracha." She's smiling to herself now as her preparations for the use of this lovely little poetry book begin to get exciting. Ms. Castaño knows of a market where she can buy some gourds to use in making maracas as described in the poem "Gourds." She knows that her friend Marcella will be glad to bring her loom to school so the children can practice weaving as they read "I Saw a Woman Weaving."

After that experience she can teach the children to weave paper place mats and maybe one of the mothers will come to school to make tortillas as a culminating activity on Friday. She picks up two ears of corn to take to school so the children will understand how the tortilla flour is made.

Ms. Castaño makes a list of new vocabulary that will be learned this week and is pleased to see many new Spanish and English words on the list. Her native English speakers will be learning a lot from this week's poetry unit, too.

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Mr. Millar's sixth graders are exploring survival skills through a combined literature and science study based on several survival stories, *My Side of the Mountain* (George, 1959), *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960), *River Rats, Inc.*, (George, 1979), and *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987). The students are working in groups to explore the realia they have found or had relatives send to them from the areas in which the stories took place. In some cases they have been able to actually taste the berries and boiled twigs that the characters in the books had to eat to survive.

Mr. Millar has contributed some of the realia used in the study, like some of the more primitive tools that are no longer readily available. In other cases the students have used some of the raw materials described in the books to actually construct the tools and cooking utensils made by the characters in the stories. Now that the students have all read one of the survival stories, they are comparing the survival strategies used in each of the books.

"Most of the tools they made in the stories depended a lot on the wood and stone and other materials that were available in the area," Johan observes.

"That is very true," Mr. Millar agrees. "What else was affected by the location of the story?"

"The problems they had," Susana replies. "Survival in the Canadian wilderness is very different from survival on a Pacific island."

"I thought it was interesting that they had different plants that they used for medicine," Teresa adds.

"The botany books we looked at listed a lot of plants that were edible or used for medicinal purposes," Jacob says. "I never knew that you could eat boiled twigs, either."

"They sure don't taste too great," Teresa says with a grin.

"What could you eat if you were stranded around this area?" Mr. Millar asks.

"Twinkies from the Minute Market," Susana jokes.

"No, seriously," Mr. Millar says. "Are there any local plants you could eat?"

"My grandmother says they used to eat dandelion salad," Johan says. "We could try that. We have a lot of dandelions growing in our yard."

"See whether you can get her recipe," Mr. Millar says with a smile. "We're going to take a survival hike in a few weeks so we need to research the plants that we may have to eat. Mr. Smithson, the botanist at the college, is coming along just to make sure we don't poison ourselves. We will also have to gather indigenous materials from the woods to use as tools and cooking utensils. We have some research to do before we go, though. All we will carry along is a supply of water and some very basic tools like the stone and wood hatchets and a first-aid kit. But first, let's go to the Internet and see if we can find out what kinds of plants are indigenous to our local area and decide if they can be safely eaten or not. Then we will be off to gather our survival feast!"

The students looked at Mr. Millar with a wide assortment of expressions, from excitement to apprehension.

## CONCLUSION

The use of realia in the classroom supports student learning in a wide variety of ways. Introducing real objects that can be seen, felt, and manipulated is a powerful way to connect vocabulary to real life. The use of realia is motivating to students because they can actually use the real objects in the way in which they are intended to be used. Realia introduces an authentic hands-on nature to many lessons. The use of real objects conveys meaning in a way that no photograph or illustration can. There is no confusion over the size, weight, texture, or smell of an object, fruit, vegetable, or tool when the real thing is present. In some cases it becomes important to provide several objects in order to see the range of possibilities, such as several different kinds of apples or tiny sunflowers to be compared with the huge examples seen in certain parts of the world. The teacher can be extremely innovative in the use of realia as demonstrated in the applications and examples found in chapters 22 and 39 in this text.

### EXAMPLES OF APPROXIMATION BEHAVIORS RELATED TO THE TESOL STANDARDS

Pre-K-3 students will:

- associate written symbols and realia.
- represent story sequence with realia.

4-8 students will:

- compare and contrast real objects.
- represent information through the use of realia.

9-12 students will:

- describe change and growth in real things.
- gather and organize realia appropriate for reports.

## References

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